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Lentils, a legume named for their lens-shape, have been part of the human diet for more than 10,000 years. Relative newcomers in North America, they arrived here in the early 1900s. Portable, tasty, non-perishable, and adaptable to any cuisine, lentils are part of the signature dishes of many lands.

Lentils may be versatile but they are not created equal. Green and brown lentils cook quickly, evenly, and keep their shape. Yellow, red, and orange lentils get mushy when cooked, best for soups and sauces rather than serving on their own. Split lentils cook down quickly.

How to buy: Lentils come in colors from yellow to red to green, brown, and black. They are sold in many forms—with or without the skin (seed coat), whole or split. You want the freshest lentils you can find so buy your lentils from a store with rapid turnover. Powder in the packaging indicates older legumes.

How to store: Lentils keep well for months if not years in a dry, cool, dark place. Older lentils take longer to cook. Once cooked, lentils keep in the fridge for about a week.

How to cook up plump lentils that keep their shape: Rinse lentils; sort out stones and other debris. Place 1 cup washed lentils in a pot with 2 cups of water along with seasonings such as bay leaf and garlic. Bring to a rapid boil and then barely simmer for the rest of cooking time. Add water as needed to keep lentils covered. Cook 20 to 30 minutes. Add the salt, tomatoes, vinegar, and lemon juice at the end of cooking as these ingredients keep the lentil skins from softening.

Cooked lentils are culinary workhorses. Who doesn't love an easy weeknight meal? Consider making a lentil bowl—toss cooked lentils with oil and vinegar and top it with a soft cooked egg. Serve with your choice of bread. Now that's a simple and satisfying meal.

RECIPE for health

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featured food:
LENTILS

Lentil Meatballs

By Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, Residential Dining Services
Makes 24 meatballs, Serves 6-8

- ½ c dried brown lentils
- ½ c panko bread crumbs
- ½ c coconut milk
- 4 oz fresh mushrooms, minced
- 1 small onion, minced
- 4 T chopped fresh parsley
- 2 T chopped basil
- 1 T tahini
- ½ c rice flour
- 1 t ground thyme
- ½ t ground cumin
- 1 t ground black pepper
- ½ t garlic powder
- 1 t salt
- 5 oz sweet potato, peeled, small diced, and cooked until tender
- 2 oz red bell pepper, small dice
- Vegetable oil (optional)

Wash and sort lentils. Place in small bowl and add 1 c water; soak overnight. Or, if you're ready to make these and you just noticed the instruction to soak overnight, simmer lentils in water for 10 minutes—you want them to be slightly undercooked.

Combine bread crumbs and coconut milk in small bowl and let sit for 10 minutes. Preheat oven to 350°F.

Place lentils in food processor; blend until a paste begins to form. Add the soaked panko bread crumbs; pulse until mixture is thoroughly combined. Add mushroom, onion, fresh herbs, and tahini. Pulse until combined.

Whisk together the dry ingredients. Add to the food processor bowl and pulse until combined.

Transfer the mixture to a mixing bowl. Fold in the sweet potato and bell pepper. With wet hands, form the mixture into 1 oz meatballs. Place on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake for 8 minutes, rotate pan and bake another 10 minutes. For extra crunchy exterior, remove from oven after the first 8 minutes; deep fry or pan fry in vegetable oil until brown.